

People Willfully Ignore the Pandemic Risk of Animal Agriculture

From [Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today/Animal Emotions](#)

May 2021

Research shows they blame wild animal trade or lack of government preparation.

This essay was written with The University of Kent psychologist [Dr. Kristof Dhont](#).

A week ago, Dr. Dhont wrote to me after he'd read an essay titled "[What the COVID-19 Crisis Is Telling Humanity](#)," noting that I might be interested in new research on the public understanding of zoonotic disease risk and whether people recognize the risks from animal agriculture. He was referring to a piece called "[The role of meat appetite in willfully disregarding factory farming as a pandemic catalyst risk](#)," published by himself, Jared Piazza, and Gordon Hodson in the journal [Appetite](#).^{1,2} We agreed to write an essay about this seminal research.

COVID-19 is a once-in-a-century pandemic that has killed scores of people, incapacitated economies, [education](#), and travel, plus severely disrupted [social life](#) globally. Although scientists forewarned about the imminence of global pandemics such as COVID-19, humanity collectively failed to dodge its arrival. Sensibly, governments deployed a range of tactics to curb the further spread of the disease, saving human lives. Yet, with the dominant focus on how to be prepared and respond once pandemics hit, surprisingly few conversations seriously discuss prevention tactics.

The narrow focus on reactionary measures against COVID-19 seems to hinder direct conversations about disease risk generally and misses the overarching problem: *The connection between zoonotic disease and the human treatment of animals*. As [Jonathan Safran Foer](#) and [Aaron S Gross](#) candidly described it: “We are preoccupied with the production of face masks, but we appear unconcerned with the farms that are producing pandemics. The world is burning and we are reaching for more fire extinguishers while gasoline soaks through the tinder at our feet.”

The danger of animal agriculture

The forced confinement of large numbers of animals is a key risk factor for zoonotic diseases. This applies not only to live animal (“wet”) markets, such as in Wuhan (China), where the animal-human transmission of COVID-19 is suspected to have happened, but also to factory farms. Scientists have been warning for decades that factory farms are breeding grounds for influenza viruses, causing disease outbreaks such as the “avian flu” and “swine flu” epidemics, and are key drivers of antibiotic resistance threat, given the overuse of antibiotics.³ Given the catastrophic proportions of the current pandemic, one would expect greater public [attention](#) to be given to the zoonotic disease risk posed by animal agriculture. However, solutions to this problem require policy changes and personal sacrifices, akin to dealing with the looming climate emergency.

When it comes to habits and norms surrounding eating animals, meat-eaters hold beliefs in a protective manner and often engage in motivated-cognitive processes whereby they actively distort or disregard relevant information that challenges their consumption habits. As social psychologists Dhont and his colleagues wondered whether people acknowledge, or instead willfully disregard, the role of factory farming in causing infectious diseases; they investigated public opinion of zoonotic diseases to address this research question [by conducting two studies early in the 2020 pandemic](#), using samples of British adults.

The findings confirmed that people blame factory farms and global meat consumption less than wild animal trade and consumption or lack of government preparedness. Moreover, people largely focused on reactionary solutions to potential future outbreaks, such as having specialized teams on standby or investing in medical equipment. Solutions addressing deeper causes were considered less important, with animal agriculture being particularly disregarded as a facilitator of infectious disease. Those highly committed to eating animals especially struggled to acknowledge that factory farms and global meat consumption are in need of changing to prevent future disease outbreaks.

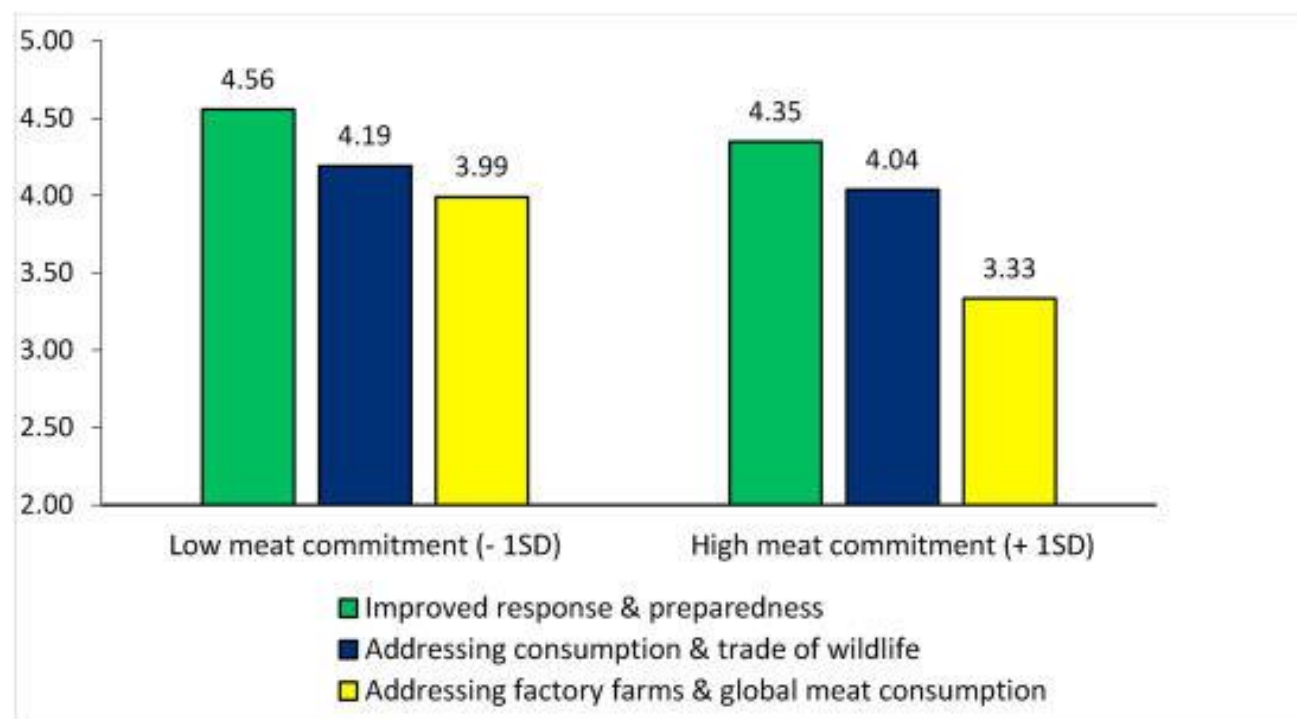


Fig. 1. Endorsement of different solutions to infectious disease by the level of meat commitment (Study 1).

Source: *The role of meat appetite in willfully disregarding factory farming as a pandemic catalyst risk*, "open access."

Next, in an experiment, we informed participants about zoonotic disease risk either from factory farms or from wild animal markets. Even after reading about the risks of factory farms in the spread of disease, committed meat-eaters were still less convinced of policies to change or ban factory farming than of policies aimed at better preparing for pandemics. Yet, when reading the same information about wild animal markets, they endorsed policies to reduce, regulate, or ban wild animal markets. The findings indicate that as well as failing to recognize the role of factory farming in causing infectious diseases, committed meat-eaters willfully disregard solutions targeting animal agriculture and global meat consumption to prevent future pandemics.

What do the data show?

These findings illustrate that appetite for meat poses a stumbling block to mobilize public recognition of disease risk from animal agriculture, precisely because solutions to this problem implicate their dietary habits. This research adds to the growing body of research showing that the meat-motivated mind goes to great lengths in justifying the continuation of eating animals by minimizing or ignoring the detrimental

impact of animal agriculture on global health and [the environment](#) while causing an enormous amount of animal suffering.

Meat-eaters are thus [very good at playing the mental gymnastics](#) game by applying a wide range of psychological tricks to make it possible to profess their love for animals while simultaneously eating animals.⁴ These new findings reveal that this disturbing paradox and appetite for meat not only comes at the costs of animal lives but also prevents humankind from taking action towards a safer and healthier future for everyone.

References

Notes

- 1) The abstract reads: Most infectious diseases are zoonotic, “jumping” from animals to humans, with COVID-19 no exception. Although many zoonotic transmissions occur on industrial-scale factory farms, public discussions mainly blame wild animal (“wet”) markets or focus on reactionary solutions, posing a psychological obstacle to preventing future pandemics. In two pre-registered studies early in the 2020 pandemic, we examined whether British adults fail to recognize factory farming in causing epidemics, and whether such dismissal represents motivated cognition. Cross-sectional data (Study 1, N = 302) confirmed that people blame factory farms and global meat consumption less than wild animal trade and consumption or lack of government preparedness, especially among meat-committed persons. Experimental exposure (Study 2, N = 194) to information blaming factory farms (vs. wild animal markets) produced lower endorsement of preventive solutions than of reactionary solutions, which was exacerbated among meat-committed persons. These findings suggest that people, especially those highly committed to eating meat, willfully disregard solutions targeting animal agriculture and global meat consumption to prevent future pandemics precisely because such solutions implicate their dietary habits. Better understanding motivated beliefs about the causes of and solutions to pandemics is critical for developing interventions.
- 2) A press release called ["Many do not recognise animal agriculture's link to infectious diseases"](#) can be seen [here](#).
- 3) References on zoonotic disease risk and anti-biotic resistance threat:
 1. Aarestrup, F. (2012). Get pigs off antibiotics. *Nature* 486, 465–466. doi:10.1038/486465a
 2. Graham, J. P., Leibler, J. H., Price, L. B., Otte, J. M., Pfeiffer, D. U., Tiensin, T., & Silbergeld, E. K. (2008). The animal-human interface and infectious disease in industrial food animal production: rethinking biosecurity and biocontainment. *Public Health Reports*, 123(3), 282–299. Doi:10.1177/003335490812300309
 3. Jones, B. A., Grace D., Kock, R., Alonso, S., Rushton J., Said M. Y. ... Pfeiffer, D.U. (2013). Zoonosis emergence and agroecological change. *PNAS* 110, 8399-8404. doi:10.1073/pnas.1208059110
 4. Moyer, M. W. (2016). The looming threat of factory superbugs. *Scientific American* 315, 70-79. doi: 10.1038/scientificamerican1216-70.

- 4) Dhont, K. & Hodson, G. (Eds.) (2020). *Why We Love and Exploit Animals: Bridging Insights From Academia and Advocacy*. Routledge. For an interview about this groundbreaking book see ["The Psychology Behind Why We Love and Exploit Animals"](#).